Trump 2025: Dystopia and Fascism – The Rise of Authoritarianism in the New Government?

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Republican presidential nominee, former U.S. President Donald Trump arrives to speak during a campaign rally at Suburban Collection Showplace on October 26, 2024 in Novi, Michigan. Photo: Anna Moneymaker.

Donald Trump's first campaign and election were not merely a triumph for populism but a "game-changer," bringing it to the forefront not just as an ideology but as a method of governance. Trump's rise reshaped Western democracies, fostering a culture where political norms were no longer stable foundations but tools to be discarded when inconvenient. This commentary seeks to analyze Trump's prospective second administration and its potential to deepen existing fractures in governance. By examining the cabinet figures, controversies, and projected policies, this analysis will explore their implications for the balance of powers, climate policy, immigration, justice, and international relations.

By João Ferreira Dias

The return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2025 raises profound concerns about the future of democracy in the United States. With a cabinet composed of figures associated with populism, climate denial, extreme nativism, and allegations of serious criminal conduct, the emerging government signals a shift towards authoritarianism.

Authors like Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2019) and Yascha Mounk (2018) have noted the far-reaching impact of Trump on contemporary politics. His first campaign and election were not merely a triumph for populism but a "game-changer," bringing it to the forefront not just as an ideology but as a method of governance. Trump's rise reshaped Western democracies, fostering a culture where political norms were no longer stable foundations but tools to be discarded when inconvenient.

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Populism, Resentment, and the White Working Class

The literature on populism emphasizes the "us vs. them" dichotomy as central to the ideology and practice of populist movements. This narrative is not merely rhetorical but structural, enabling populist leaders to redefine democratic politics around exclusionary lines. As Mondon and Winter (2020) observe, male anxiety—rooted in fears of economic insecurity and immigration—was pivotal in mobilizing support for both Brexit and Trump's 2016 election. This anxiety, framed as a defense of cultural and economic stability, has become a powerful driver of populist coalitions.

Yascha Mounk (2018) identifies the declining economic security of the white working class as a critical backdrop to this shift. This demographic, comprising rural laborers and displaced urban workers, has been profoundly affected by globalization and industrial outsourcing, which have hollowed out the economic foundations of entire communities. These "losers of globalization," marginalized by liberal economic policies, have turned to populist leaders who promise to restore not just jobs but dignity and identity. Begum, Mondon, and Winter (2021) argue that this group has become the symbolic "people" populist radical-right movements claim to represent. This realignment echoes historical fascist strategies, where economic grievances were redirected into nationalist and exclusionary frameworks, undermining class solidarity in favor of cultural antagonism.

Trump's "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) slogan was the masterstroke that consolidated these sentiments, offering a promise of cultural revival that transcended purely economic appeals. Fukuyama (2018) notes that this shift reflects a reconfiguration of the political spectrum, as economic discontent has increasingly been reframed as a cultural battle. The rise of "culture wars" (Hunter, 1991; Hartman, 2019) has enabled populist leaders like Trump to weaponize moral and cultural grievances, portraying the left as a threat to traditional values and national identity. Concepts such as "woke culture" (McWhorter, 2021) and "cultural Marxism" (Jamin, 2014) are invoked to delegitimize progressive movements, presenting them as enemies of the "common man."

The "cultural backlash" phenomenon, as described by Norris and Inglehart (2019), plays a crucial role here. By amplifying fears of moral alienation and cultural displacement, Trump crafted a coalition that opposed not only the policies of the left but the foundational principles of liberal democracy itself. This backlash was not an aberration but a calculated strategy to consolidate power, mobilizing resentment to erode the very norms that sustain democratic institutions.

The Collapse of Democratic Norms and the Dismantling of Checks and Balances

Levitsky and Ziblatt's (2019) framework on democratic backsliding highlights how democracies often erode through gradual institutional decay rather than abrupt authoritarian takeovers. Trump's presidency exemplified this process, as his persistent attacks on the judiciary, the media, and electoral integrity undermined the legitimacy of these institutions.

Trump's rhetoric, especially his false claims of election fraud, was not merely an expression of personal grievance but a deliberate strategy to delegitimize the rule of law. These narratives culminated in the January 6th Capitol riot, an unprecedented attack on democratic governance in the modern United States. By encouraging insurrectionist behavior, Trump signaled his willingness to destabilize institutions rather than accept their role as checks on executive power.

Policies such as mass deportations further illustrate this erosion of norms, creating an environment of fear and division that undermines trust in governance. At the same time, Trump's environmental agenda—typified by proposals to expand oil drilling in Alaska—exemplifies his administration's disdain for scientific expertise. As Mondon and Winter argue, this confluence of environmental degradation and exclusionary nationalism, or "bio-cultural nativism," reflects a broader authoritarian project that sidelines expertise in favor of ideological loyalty.

Nativism, Class, and the Fragmentation of Liberal Democracy

Mondon and Winter (2020) highlight the centrality of nativism in Trump's political strategy. For the white working class, nativist rhetoric offers both cultural validation and a channel for economic grievances, reinforcing the "us vs. them" framework. Trump's appeal lies in his ability to present himself as the protector of "real Americans" against perceived threats from immigrants, elites, and progressive activists.

Mounk (2018) warns that the separation of democracy from liberalism creates fertile ground for authoritarianism. While democracy centers on majority rule, liberalism safeguards minority rights and institutional checks on power. Under Trump, this decoupling fosters a dangerous "tyranny of the majority," in which populist policies—such as border walls and mass deportations—erode the pluralism that underpins liberal democracy.

This fragmentation of liberal democracy has broader implications, as populist leaders exploit cultural and economic insecurities to dismantle the institutional norms that sustain democratic governance. The result is a political landscape where nativism and exclusionary policies are not fringe elements but central features of mainstream governance.

Trump's Cabinet: A Microcosm of Authoritarian Drift

Trump's prospective 2025 cabinet crystallizes his administration's authoritarian tendencies. Jason Stanley (2018) identifies the vilification of out-groups and the consolidation of power among loyalists as hallmarks of authoritarian regimes. Trump's cabinet appointments reflect this dynamic, blending ideological extremism with personal loyalty at the expense of institutional norms and expertise.

J.D. Vance emerges as a key figure in this trajectory. As an intellectual voice for the radical right, Vance bridges populist grievance with the cultural warfare central to Trump's appeal. His rhetoric, centered on the "decline of traditional values," positions him as an architect of the culture wars that sustain Trump's coalition. Vance's influence extends beyond policy, shaping a narrative that frames the MAGA movement as the defender of American identity against the perceived excesses of progressivism.

Elon Musk, another prominent figure in Trump's circle, wields outsized influence as both a deregulation advocate and a media magnate. Through his dominance of platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Musk amplifies misinformation, weakening public trust in institutions and expertise. His inclusion in the cabinet signals a shift toward governance driven by individual power rather than institutional accountability, further undermining democratic norms.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a vocal climate change skeptic, exemplifies the administration's disregard for scientific consensus. Kennedy's presence underscores Trump's strategy of sidelining expertise in favor of ideological alignment, with significant implications for environmental policy and institutional credibility.

Finally, figures like Matt Gaetz, despite their legal controversies, illustrate Trump's prioritization of loyalty over ethical standards. This normalization of controversial and compromised figures signals a broader erosion of accountability, mirroring the dynamics of historical authoritarian regimes.

Conclusion: The Auth Liberal Democracy

Trump's cabinet is not just a collection of individuals; it is a reflection of his administration's authoritarian vision. By prioritizing ideological conformity, cultural grievance, and personal loyalty, Trump's appointments deepen the erosion of democratic norms and institutional credibility. The profiles of figures like Vance, Musk, and Kennedy illuminate how populism and nativism are reshaping the American political landscape, with long-term consequences for the principles of liberal democracy.

Resisting this drift requires more than institutional safeguards; it demands a societal recommitment to pluralism, expertise, and the rule of law. Without such efforts, the United States risks cementing a political model where authoritarianism thrives under the guise of democratic legitimacy.

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